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HINDU AVATĀRA AND CHRISTIAN INCARNATION: A COMPARISON

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This is a comparative study of the two important concepts of *avatāra* and incarnation¹ as found in Hinduism and Christianity.² After tracing the development of the two beliefs, we shall highlight the main similarities and differences between the two understandings. Such comparison not only facilitates better mutual understanding but also helps each tradition to understand itself better. The more a religion remains within its own ghetto, the poorer will be its self-understanding. It is precisely through comparison and contrast that a faith can come to comprehend itself more deeply. It is only through encounter with another that we understand our own identity. The similarities with other traditions help us to appreciate the larger significance of our beliefs and practices, and the differences give us insights into the unique features of our own tradition. Furthermore, the correlation and distinction that we notice can inspire us to question things that we have taken for granted, and we can also benefit from a cross-cultural fertilization through an ongoing interreligious dialogue.

The Development of the Doctrine in the Two Traditions

Hinduism

Derived from *ava* (down) and *tī* (to cross), an *avatāra* is generally a “descent” of a deity, or part of a deity, or of some other superhuman being in a manifest form. An extraordinary human being may also be called (a secondary) *avatāra*. The *avatāra* doctrine is most typical of Vaiṣṇavism. One normally speaks of *avatāras* of Viṣṇu³ or of someone associated with him, for example Kṛṣṇa. Although we do find *avatāras* in Śaivism and Śaktism, they are not universally accepted in these two traditions.⁴ One also comes across references to *avatāras* of other deities, for example of Sūrya,⁵ as well as of sages, demons, and others.⁶

Although earlier texts mention deities taking on various forms, the first formulation of the *doctrine* of *avatāras* is found in the *Bhagavad-gītā*,⁷ which was probably composed around the second century B.C.E.⁸ In the frequently quoted verses 4.5–9 of the *Gītā*, it is said that even though Kṛṣṇa is unborn and changeless, he freely, and by his own power (i.e., unlike those who are born because of their past *karman*), comes into being in different ages. He does so in order to protect the good, destroy the wicked, reestablish righteousness (*dharma*), and free his devotees from rebirth. Kṛṣṇa also comes to teach the paths to salvation, which he does through most of the *Gītā*.

From the text of the *Gītā* we can conclude, first, that the form of the *avatāra* is real, and not merely an appearance. Even though Kṛṣṇa is himself unborn and

changeless, he nonetheless comes into being (*sambhavāmi*) (4.6, 8), emanates himself (*srjāmi*) (4.7), has many births (*janman*) (4.5), and resorts to or assumes (*āśrita*) a human (*mānuṣī*) form or body (*tanu*) (9.11). In other words, even though Kṛṣṇa is eternal and changeless as a divine being, he evolves his *avatāra* body in the form of a human being. From this it is quite natural to conclude that Kṛṣṇa's human form is a real body and not an illusory one.⁹ Second, we should deduce that the human body of Kṛṣṇa is imperfect, since he comes into being by resorting to (*adhiṣṭhāya*) *prakṛti* or material nature (4.6). This *prakṛti* is made up of the three imperfect *guṇas*, and hence his form has to be defective. It should be noted that although the three *guṇas* may be said to be "perfect" insofar as they follow their own nature, they are imperfect in comparison with higher types of being, just as matter, by its very nature, is imperfect compared to spirit, which is more perfect, or just as creatures are imperfect in contrast to God, who is most perfect. Since Kṛṣṇa's body is made of this imperfect *prakṛti*, we may deduce that the *Gītā* implies that he has an imperfect human body. His human body is limited by *prakṛti*, which is called his lower (*aparā*) nature (7.4–5).¹⁰ Thus, Kṛṣṇa is both really divine and really human, as well as imperfect as a human being. It is only later on that the Vaiṣṇavites developed the idea of a perfect "pure matter" (*śuddha-sattva*) constituting the body or form of the *avatāra*.

In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa, who is also called Viṣṇu,¹¹ is the one who descends as *avatāra*. However, in some later developments he is often considered as one of the many descents of Viṣṇu. Among several lists, there is a standard list of ten *avatāras*: the Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-Lion, the Dwarf, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, the Buddha,¹² and Kalkin.¹³ Kṛṣṇa and sometimes also Rāma and Narasimha (the Man-Lion) are full (*pūrṇa*) *avatāras*, in whom all the powers of Viṣṇu are present, while the others are usually called partial (*aṁśa*) *avatāras*.¹⁴

The general purpose of an *avatāra* is to restore righteousness by destroying the wicked and protecting the good. However, there are also various other objectives. For example, one may come to teach a particular branch of knowledge, another may delude the wicked, still another may usher in the golden age like a Messiah, and so forth.¹⁵ Some descents help devotees to practice various forms of loving devotion (*bhakti*), even subjecting themselves to the devotees. However, not every *avatāra* comes to grant ultimate salvation.

There are descents even of parts of Viṣṇu's body or of his ornaments.¹⁶ In fact, for some, every creature is an *avatāra*. The Pāñcarātra classifies *avatāras* as follows: (1) *Sākṣād* (Direct) *avatāras*, which are primary, springing directly from God; (2) *Āveśa* (Entrance or Possessed) *avatāras*, which are animate creatures into whom God enters by his own form (*svarūpa*) or power (*śakti*); (3) *Vyūha* (Grouped or Arranged) *avatāras*, namely Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha—the latter three have cosmic, superintending, and salvific functions; (4) the *Antaryāmin* (Inner Controller) *avatāra*, who is God inspiring us from within; and (5) the *Arcā* (Worship) *avatāra*, namely a descent of Viṣṇu into a consecrated image for the sake of worship (*arcā*).¹⁷

Several schools basically accept these various kinds of *avatāras*, with minor modifications. For example, the Nimbārka school mentions the following types: (1)

The three *Guṇāvatāras*, namely the triad (*trimūrti*) of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, who preside over the *rajas*, *sattva*, and *tamas guṇas*, respectively. (2) There are the three *Puruṣāvatāras*, of whom the first controls *prakṛti* and evolves the evolute called *mahaṭ*; the second is the inner controller of the collection of all creatures; and the third is the inner controller of the individual creatures. (3) The *Līlāvatāras* are of two kinds: (a) There are *Āveśavatāras*, that is, ordinary animate beings (i) into whom parts of God himself (*svāmśāveśa*) enter or (ii) into whom only parts of his power (*śaktyamśāveśa*) enter. Among these latter, some are called *Vibhavas* and others *Prabhavas*. (b) The *Svarūpāvatāras*, that is, *avatāras* who are the manifestation of God himself in his being (*sat*), consciousness (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*), are of two types: (i) *Aṃśarūpa*, in whom God is fully present but manifests only part of his powers, qualities, and so forth, and (ii) *Pūrṇarūpa*, in whom God manifests his powers, qualities, and so forth completely.¹⁸

Bengal Vaiṣṇavism and some other schools replace Viṣṇu with Kṛṣṇa, who is the source of all *avatāras* (*avatārin*). Bengal Vaiṣṇavism categorizes the *avatāras* of Kṛṣṇa into the following: (1) the *Puruṣāvatāra*, who is the first *avatāra* and appears as Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha; (2) *Guṇāvatāras*, namely the triad (*trimūrti*) of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva, who preside over the *rajas*, *sattva*, and *tamas guṇas*, respectively; (3) *Līlāvatāras*, which are the generally well-known ones; and (4) *Kalpa-*, *Manvantara-*, and *Yuga-avatāras*, which descend during the cosmic periods called *Kalpas*, and so forth.¹⁹

There are descents in the form of animals, a body that is partly animal and partly human, and human beings, both male and female—for example the female *avatāra* Mohinī. However, there are also *avatāras* in the shape of plants, for example the crooked mango tree in the Daṇḍaka forest,²⁰ and of stones, for example the *śālagrāma* stone.

Linked with the belief in *avatāras* is also the idea of *vibhūtis*, that is, God's manifestations in various qualities and aspects of human life; generally these qualities or aspects are the first or the best of their kind, for example life in creatures, the fragrance of the earth, bravery in human beings, the moon among the stars, the Himalaya among mountains, and so forth. But at times God manifests himself also in desire and in gambling dice.²¹

Various founders and saints of the Vaiṣṇava sects are also considered *avatāras*. For example, Nimbārka is the descent of the Sudarśana Cakra or discus of Kṛṣṇa; his disciple Nivāsa is the *avatāra* of the conch of Kṛṣṇa; Vallabha is the descent of the face of Kṛṣṇa; Caitanya is the *avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. The Aḷvār Tiruppān is the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu's Śrīvatsa (the curl of hair on his chest), Āṅṅāḷ is the descent of Lakṣmī (Viṣṇu's wife or *śakti*), while some other Aḷvārs are *avatāras* of the attendants of Viṣṇu in his eternal heaven Vaikuṅṭha. Aḷakiya Maṇavāḷa is regarded as an *avatāra* of Rāmānuja.

In modern times, there are quite a number of individuals who are regarded as *avatāras* by their followers, for example Ramakrishna and Aurobindo, among many others.²² It is interesting to note that Mira Richard or the Mother of Pondicherry, who was born in Paris of Egyptian parents, is also considered an *avatāra*. Meher Baba,

who was born a Zoroastrian, referred to himself as a descent and claimed to have been Christ. Satya Sai Baba claims to be an *avatāra* of Jesus Christ as well as of the Shirdi Sai Baba.²³

European and non-Vaiṣṇavite Hindu scholars have proposed various theories in connection with the *avatāras*. (1) Viṣṇuization: a particular *avatāra* was originally not considered to be a form of Viṣṇu but “Viṣṇuized” only later on. For example, in earlier texts the fish is mentioned only as a fish and not connected with any deity; later it is associated with Prajāpati, and only still later considered an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.²⁴ (2) Apotheosis: the *avatāra* in question was first a human hero who was later divinized. For example, it is claimed that Rāma is portrayed only as a hero in the earlier parts (books 2–6) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but regarded as divine in the later parts (books 1 and 7).²⁵ (3) Composite Personality: for example, Kṛṣṇa the child god, adolescent lover, and adult hero are supposed to be three different Kṛṣṇas who were later combined into one composite personality.²⁶

I would say that even if these theories were true, a Vaiṣṇavite could claim that there has been an evolution in the human understanding of the divinity of Viṣṇu’s *avatāras*, just as the Christian Trinity came to be known only in New Testament times.²⁷ The fact that the existence of the Trinity was realized only later on does not mean that the Trinity was not in existence for all eternity. Similarly, the disciples of Jesus became aware of Jesus’ divinity only after his resurrection (Lk 24; Jn 20.9).²⁸

Christianity

On the Christian side, the word “incarnation” means “enfleshment,” based on the statement in the Gospel according to John, namely: the Word (Greek: *lógos*) became flesh (Latin: *caro* = flesh, corresponding to the Greek *sárx*) (Jn 1.14). Christians believe that the Logos or Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, assumed human reality. Incarnation refers both to the *act* of God becoming a human being as well as to the *result of this action*, namely the permanent union of the divine and human natures in the one Person of the Word.

The New Testament does not use static, metaphysical concepts to explain the mystery of the incarnation; rather, it understands the incarnation in terms of a dynamic movement. In his letter to the Philippians (2.6–11), Paul speaks first of the preexistence of the Word, then of his emptying (*kenosis*) of himself in becoming a human being, and finally of his exaltation in the resurrection. Here we have a Christology that starts from above, descends to the level of a human being, and ascends again to the divine plane. On the other hand, in the Acts of the Apostles, we have a Christology from below, starting with the human life of Jesus Christ and ascending to his glorification (e.g., Acts 2.22–36; 5.30–32; 10.36–43).

While the New Testament focuses on the functional aspect of Christ, concentrating on his life and redemptive activities, the Church in early and medieval times took a metaphysical approach, trying to understand his being. There first developed the Logos-*Sárx* (Word-Flesh) Christology, which sprouted with the Apologists²⁹ and came to full flowering in the School of Alexandria. In this Christology, the emphasis is generally on the Divine Word, while the humanity of Christ is a passive

instrument. Christ's humanity is generally said to consist of body only, or, if it includes a human soul, the latter has no theological significance. Thus the Alexandrian School defended the unity of the Person of Christ, but tended to underplay the humanity of Christ. The School of Antioch developed the Logos-*Anthropos* (Word-Human Being) scheme of Christology. This model highlights the full humanity of Christ, both body and soul. The tendency, however, was to consider Christ's humanity as subsisting in itself, so that only a moral or accidental unity was maintained between the Word and the humanity of Christ. The Antiochenes, therefore, preserved the duality of Christ's two natures, but did not maintain sufficiently the unity of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.)³⁰ synthesized the two dialectical emphases of the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools. It taught that in Christ there are two natures, divine and human, united in one person (*hypostasis*).³¹ Mainstream Christianity rejects a moral or accidental union of the two natures as well as a merging of the two natures into one divine-human nature. His human nature has both a human body and a human soul; but there is only one Subject, one Person, the Word. This union of the divine and human natures, subsisting in the one Person of the Word is called hypostatic union. Another Council, the Third Council of Constantinople (681), defined that in the Christ there are two wills and two operations, divine and human.

There are several implications or consequences of this hypostatic union, which are accepted by the Roman Catholic Church: (1) The divine Sonship of the human Jesus is accepted; the human Jesus is the true Son of God, and not merely an adoptive Son. (2) Jesus may be worshipped in his human form since it is hypostatically united with the Word. (3) Christ the human being can be attributed those predicates that are proper to the divine, and Christ the divine those predicates that are proper to his human nature. For example, one can say "God suffered and died" or "Jesus is creator," since there is only one Person or Subject, but one cannot say "divinity [i.e., the divine nature] died" or "Christ's humanity is creator." (4) Jesus' human nature is *de jure*, and not just *de facto*, holy and sinless because of its intimate union with the Word, in whom it subsists. Hence it is worthy of adoration; it is adored not for its own sake merely as flesh, but as united to the Word.

Depending on their Alexandrian or Antiochene orientations, theologians have reacted differently to these official teachings of the Catholic Church. Similarly, further reflections on the hypostatic union by theologians have also been based on their Antiochene or Alexandrian leanings. For example, they discuss such questions as: (1) Given the fact of the hypostatic union, *how* exactly can two complete natures (divine and human) be united in one being? (2) How can God remain unchanged in himself and yet be subject to suffering and death? (3) In connection with Jesus' self-consciousness and knowledge, does he have a human psychological ego (as distinct from the one metaphysical ego of the Logos) in addition to the divine ego? Did he enjoy beatific vision? Did he possess infused knowledge? Did he acquire knowledge as ordinary human beings do? (4) In connection with Jesus' human will, how does one maintain Jesus' freedom together with his sinlessness? Even though he was sinless, did temptation exercise an attraction on him? (5) In connection with Jesus'

divine and human operations, how does the divine nature operate through Christ's humanity; does his humanity exercise moral causality or is it a mere instrument? Similarly there has been discussion of the necessity of incarnation: some, like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, hold that had human beings not sinned, there would have been no incarnation. Others, like Irenaeus and Duns Scotus, claim that the incarnation was part of God's plan even before sin came into the world: Christ was to be the crowning glory of creation.³²

Catholic medieval scholastic theology separated Christology from Soteriology, concentrating more on the *being* of Christ than on his life and salvific work. Protestant theologians, on the other hand, were more interested in the religious, ethical, and historical implications of the incarnation than in metaphysical discussions. In modern times, many Catholic theologians, too, are no longer emphasizing a totally essentialist Christology, but are also linking it with salvation history, and are thus recapturing the dynamic functional approach of the New Testament. Without embracing the radical forms of nineteenth-century Protestant kenotic theories, which dwelt on the emptying (*kenosis*—see Phil 2.7) of Jesus' divinity, recent theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, have proposed milder forms of kenotic interpretations. Focusing on the historical Jesus, the hypostatic union is now being reinterpreted in relational and Trinitarian terms. Unlike in medieval times, the relation of Jesus to his Father is more important than the relation of his humanity to his divinity. The hypostatic union is interpreted as a union that begins with the incarnation but continues to be constituted through Jesus' life until his resurrection, which is a fulfillment and confirmation of who Jesus was before the resurrection. The Word became a human being and had a human history. The intra-Trinitarian relationship or self-sharing of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit is revealed and realized in a creaturely way in the incarnate Son, who receives and gives up his being, in obedience and love. Thus the two divine and human natures are explained as two relations. Jesus' divinity is expressed by his unity with God, and his humanity is expressed by his relation to his Father.

Besides dealing with the themes of Jesus' self-consciousness, knowledge, and freedom, modern theologians have expanded the horizons of Christology to include as well Jesus' role in liberating the oppressed from unjust social structures (Political and Liberation Theology); his significance for women and their struggle for equality with men (Feminist Theology); his relevance for ecology (Eco-Theology); his union, as a human being, with God and his importance for history and human beings (Anthropological Christology); his relationship with the cosmos (Cosmic Christology); his relationship with the Holy Spirit, who is poured out on all and works in the hearts of people (Spirit Christology); his positive relationship to Judaism (as opposed to earlier, anti-Semitic interpretations); and his role as Savior in the context of religious pluralism (Interreligious Dialogue).

We have traced the development of the doctrine of incarnation in mainstream Christianity. The basic understanding is that even though Christ the eternal Word becomes flesh, that is, a human being, he still does not lose his divinity (Jn 1.14–18);

he is one person who is both human and divine. We shall now briefly mention other ways of perceiving Jesus Christ in the Christian tradition. They may be conveniently categorized in three groups.

1. *Views that challenge or diminish Jesus' full humanity.* (a) *Gnosticism.* According to Gnosticism there is a radical dualism between spirit and matter, which is evil. Hence, God cannot assume a human body. (b) *Docetism.* Christ is divine; he only *appears* to be human. This is similar to the Advaita understanding of *avatāras*. (c) *Apollinarianism.* Christ is human, but does not have a human soul. (d) *Monophysitism.* Before the incarnation there were two natures, divine and human, but after the incarnation there remains only one divine nature, since the human nature is absorbed into the divine nature. (e) *Monotheletism.* Christ has only one, divine, will; he has no human will. (f) *Monenergism.* There is only one, divine, action in Christ; he has no human operation.

2. *Doctrines that deny the divinity of Christ.* (a) *Ebionism.* Christ did not previously exist and is not divine. (b) *Arianism.* Christ has a human dignity superior to all others, but he still remains a creature, subordinate to the divine.

3. *Understandings that do not maintain the hypostatic union.* (a) *Adoptionism.* By nature Jesus was only human, but at his baptism he was adopted as God's Son. Hence, the human nature of Christ does not have its foundation in the Second Person of the Trinity. (b) *The habitus view.* The Word assumed human form as a garment. (c) *The assumptus-homo doctrine.* The Word assumed a complete human nature and therefore a human person as well.³³

Mainstream Christianity's encounter with these various views helped it to clarify and refine its own understanding of the mystery of the incarnation.

Thus we see that some Christologies have emphasized the divine dimension over the human, others have stressed the human over the divine, a third has accepted only a moral or accidental unity of the two natures, and mainstream Christianity has tried to maintain a balance and creative tension between the two poles of humanity and divinity, which are united hypostatically in the one Person of the Word. For the purpose of our comparative study, we shall concentrate on this basic doctrine of mainstream Christianity.

Comparison

Similarities

Both the *avatāra* and the incarnation are immanent, yet transcendent and free. They are not bound by the laws of nature as human beings are. Their entry into the world is generally miraculous, accompanied by extraordinary signs.³⁴ They reveal God's personal love and concern, and emphasize loving devotion (*bhakti*) rather than knowledge (*jñāna*). In both cases, the descent of God enables human beings to ascend to God. Human beings are raised to a higher dignity; they are divinized in Hinduism and made adopted children of God in Christianity.

Both conceptions give importance to the world³⁵ and justify selfless involvement in the world, rather than renunciation of the world. In the *Gītā* (3.19–25) Kṛṣṇa

exhorts us not only to be detached but to be involved in the world and work for the welfare of people. Kṛṣṇa has been interpreted not only as one who grants other-worldly salvation but also as one who teaches the art of politics. In modern India people like Tilak and Gandhi drew inspiration from the *Gītā* to work for political freedom as well as the upliftment of the poor and the downtrodden. Similarly, the life of Rāma is a model and inspiration for people to bring about *Rāma-rājya* (the kingdom of Rāma)—the kingdom of peace, justice, and love. In the New Testament (Jn 5.17; Mt 20.28 [Mk 10.45]) as well, Jesus is concerned not only about the next world but also about establishing a kingdom of justice, peace, and love in this world. He proclaims that the poor are blessed (Lk 6.20). He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11.19 [Lk 7.34]), and heals outcasts, including lepers (Lk 7.22). Liberation theologians have drawn attention to this aspect of Jesus' life and work. They seek to remove poverty, inequality, oppression, and injustice, and to promote the kingdom of God here on earth.

In this context, it may be pointed out that, in some cases, the *avatāra* and Christ have also been misused or abused by people with vested interests. From a socioreligious standpoint, some *avatāras* have been interpreted as reflecting the superiority or domination or oppressive action of one group over another. For example, the story of the Vāmana (Dwarf) *avatāra* has been interpreted to mean the domination of the Aryan race over the Dravidian race, represented by Bali, who is pushed down to the netherworld. A racial interpretation is also given to the conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, the former standing for the Aryans³⁶ and the latter for the Dravidians. So much so that, instead of celebrating *Rāma-līlā* (the joyful and grateful commemoration and reenactment of the wonderful deeds of Rāma), some Dravidian groups, particularly in Tamil Nadu, celebrate *Rāvaṇa-līlā*, glorifying his heroic deeds and burning the effigy of Rāma. Brahmins are shown to be superior to Kṣatriyas in the story of the Brahmin Paraśurāma, who in retaliation exterminates all the males of the Kṣatriya class twenty-one times. However, in the Rāma story, the incident of Rāma's superiority over Paraśurāma in bending the bow of Viṣṇu could be understood as suggesting the superiority of the Kṣatriyas over Brahmins. In the case of the Buddha *avatāra*, Hindus are portrayed as religiously superior to Buddhists. In the history of Christianity as well, Christ has been linked with military conquests, colonization, the destruction of cultures, persecution, and intolerance of other religions. "Christ the King" has also been associated with the interests of the rich and the powerful, who exploit the poor and the helpless. In an open letter to Pope John-Paul II, when he visited Peru, representatives from different indigenous movements wrote the following:

John Paul II, we, Andean and American Indians, have decided to take advantage of your visit to return to you your Bible, since in five centuries it has not given us love, peace or justice.

Please take back your Bible and give it back to our oppressors, because they need its moral teachings more than we do. Ever since the arrival of Christopher Columbus a culture, a language, religion and values which belong to Europe have been imposed on Latin America by force.

The Bible came to us as part of the imposed colonial transformation. It was the ideological weapon of this colonialist assault. The Spanish sword which attacked and murdered the bodies of Indians by day at night became the cross which attacked the Indian soul.³⁷

The solution to this problem, of course, is not to throw the Bible or the Hindu Scriptures out the window, but to separate what is essential and perennial from what is accidental and culturally conditioned. Realizing that religion can and has been manipulated, what we need to do is to reinterpret the Bible and the Hindu texts in a liberative way.

Differences

Even though there are differences, the two concepts are not so antithetical as they appear at first sight. The distinctions are not always so clear-cut; rather they are nuanced differences. Second, the variations are due to the contrasting worldviews of the two traditions.

There are many and repeated avatāras, while Christ comes only once. This is in keeping with the respective cyclic and linear worldviews of the two traditions.³⁸ In Hinduism there are cycles of evolution and dissolution, and so in this worldview it makes sense that *avatāras* come again and again in different ages (*yugas*). In Christianity, however, the world is created only once, and it moves in a linear fashion toward a final goal, and so it makes sense that the incarnation takes place once and for all. Similarly, Christianity does not believe in rebirth: one has only one chance, one life. Hinduism, however, does believe in reincarnation.

This basic distinction of the one incarnation versus the many and repeated *avatāras* needs to be further nuanced. In the Old Testament, too, we find references to many theophanies, to God's manifesting Himself to people, for example in the form of fire, a column of fire, and so forth, but these are not regarded as incarnations.³⁹ Second, the resurrected Christ also manifests himself to his disciples. This is not a new enfleshment; it is not a new incarnation.

Third, in Christianity one speaks of the Second Coming of Christ, which is Christ's return in glory to judge the world, to punish the wicked and reward the just.⁴⁰ Nowadays the Second Coming is downplayed,⁴¹ but it is still very much part of the official teaching of Christianity.⁴² L. Berkhof, referring to Acts 1.11, points out that Christ's Second Coming will be not merely a fuller manifestation of his spiritual power but an actual coming again in person, in his physical body, which will be visible.⁴³ This Second Coming of Christ, then, is in some sense similar to an *avatāra* coming again. However, contrary to the view of Geoffrey Parrinder,⁴⁴ it also differs from the general theory of successive *avatāras*, for it is not a new incarnation but the same identical Christ returning in glory, at the end of the world. In other words, once the Second Person (the Word) of the Trinity has a human nature, he does not relinquish that human nature, even though it is glorified at his Second Coming.⁴⁵ On the other hand, once the *avatāras* have accomplished the purposes for which they have descended, they abandon their bodies, thus returning to their original (Viṣṇu) form. There are exceptions, however. For example, in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism the *avatāras* are

eternal; that is, the *avatāra* always has that form and never discards it.⁴⁶ Even so, there is still a difference; there are many eternal *avatāras* in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, while in Christianity there is only one everlasting incarnation.

Samuel Rayan mentions also Christ's presence in human hearts and the continuation of his activity in the world through his Spirit.⁴⁷ Earlier, V. Chakkarai asserted more strongly that "the Spirit of Jesus is incarnated again and again in human hearts. . . . God dwells with men . . . not merely by their side, but in them."⁴⁸ While it is true that, in Christianity, Christ is mystically present in people and in the world, especially through his Spirit, this presence is not the same as his physical, bodily presence. On the other hand, in Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, Kṛṣṇa, who is the source of *avatāras*, is eternally present not only in his eternal heaven, but also on the earths of different universes.⁴⁹

In the context of the Vaiṣṇavite understanding of *avatāras*, it is very interesting to outline the views of Thomas Aquinas. He holds that even though in actual fact there is only one incarnation and it is more proper for the Second Person, rather than for the other two Persons, to become incarnate,⁵⁰ if God wanted, the other two Persons could also have become incarnate.⁵¹ It is also possible for all the three Persons of the Trinity together to assume one and the same human nature.⁵² In addition, he points out that it is possible for a Trinitarian Person to take up more than one human nature. Thus, it would appear that the Second Person could become incarnate again.⁵³ Although he states that it would not be fitting for the Second Person to become incarnate in all human beings,⁵⁴ we could conclude that he does not rule out the possibility of God becoming incarnate in all human beings.⁵⁵ According to Aquinas, it is appropriate for human nature to be assumed by God. In the case of angelic nature it would not be so fitting, although it is possible for angelic nature to be assumed by God. Nonrational creatures, however, do not have the aptitude for being assumed by God.⁵⁶ This deficiency on the part of nonrational creatures, however, does not lessen God's power to assume such natures.⁵⁷ This would mean that, absolutely speaking, animals, plants, and even inanimate things need not be totally excluded.⁵⁸ The fact that Aquinas accepts many and repeated incarnations at least on the level of possibility, if not actuality, brings the Christian concept of incarnation closer to the Hindu one. Some theologians also speak of the possibility of another incarnation in some universe unknown to us, or even on another planet within our universe, if they are inhabited by intelligent beings.⁵⁹

On the Hindu side, a certain amount of uniqueness is implied in the belief in one or another *avatāra* being considered as the Supreme Being (e.g., Kṛṣṇa or Rāma), and also in the tradition, among some Hindus, of only one *avatāra* appearing in each age or *yuga*.⁶⁰ One may think that the frequent repetition of *avatāras* and especially the extension of the concept to every creature may lessen the theological significance of the doctrine, but it also serves to underline God's providence and his divine presence in all creatures. This is in keeping with the cosmic worldview, as opposed to the linear, historical, anthropocentric worldview of Christianity. In the cosmic worldview, everything is permeated by the divine, and we become aware of divine manifestations repeatedly and at different times. In Christianity, on the other hand,

the emphasis is on the divine transcendence, and therefore the stress is on the once-and-for-all intervention of Christ, who is the sole mediator.⁶¹

The Vaiṣṇava avatāras and the Christian incarnation are both real. However, while the former are perfect, the latter is imperfect. In Vaiṣṇavism the *avatāras* are real and absolutely perfect, while in Christianity Christ is also real, but imperfect; that is, he has human imperfections, except sin. In contrast to Advaita,⁶² the Vaiṣṇavite theologians hold that the *avatāras* are real. Some Christian theologians in India have stated that in Hinduism *avatāras* are not real.⁶³ Some have also claimed that the Hindu *avatāra* forms are apparent, as in Docetism.⁶⁴ They wrongly conclude that since the *avatāras* are not defective they are unreal apparitions.⁶⁵ This is not true of Vaiṣṇavism but is applicable, for instance, to the Advaitic tradition. Rāmānuja and other Vaiṣṇavites maintain that the *avatāras* are real. Rāmānuja explicitly mentions the reality (*satyatva, yāthātmya*) of Kṛṣṇa's birth and body.⁶⁶

Now mainstream Christianity, too, considers Christ to be really human, but there is a difference. According to the Vaiṣṇavites, although the *avatāras* are real, they do not have any flaws, since it is impossible for God to be imperfect. This is part of the mystery of the incarnation in Christianity: how God can be both perfect (as divine) and imperfect (as human) at the same time. We have seen above that, in the *Gītā*, the *avatāra* has to be deficient, since its body is made up of the imperfect *prakṛti*. This limitation, however, is not fully like that of ordinary human beings, for Kṛṣṇa, unlike human beings, is not subject to *karman*, and remembers his past births; in other words, he maintains his transcendence and freedom just as Christ does. However, unlike in the case of Christ, Kṛṣṇa's divine Self is not hypostatically united with *prakṛti*, since in Hinduism there is no substantial union between the spiritual self (*puruṣa*) and material nature (*prakṛti*). His union with *prakṛti* is therefore "not hypostatic, but manifestative, or at most instrumental." Further, Kṛṣṇa assumes material *prakṛti*, but does not have a human soul as in Christ's case.⁶⁷ Of course, since, in the Hindu worldview, there is no substantial union between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* in the case of even ordinary human beings, one cannot expect such a union between Kṛṣṇa's divine *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. On the other hand, in the *Gītā* this *prakṛti*, paradoxically, is not so unrelated to Kṛṣṇa as in the case of ordinary human beings, since it, together with the souls, is part of Kṛṣṇa even before he becomes an *avatāra*.⁶⁸

In later Vaiṣṇavite theology, the forms or bodies of the *avatāras* are made up of "pure matter" (*śuddha-sattva*), which consists of six perfect or transcendental *guṇas*,⁶⁹ and not ordinary, *prākṛtic* matter, which consists of the three imperfect *guṇas*.⁷⁰ This idea of the "pure matter" (*śuddha-sattva*) seems to have had its origin in the Pāñcarātra tradition, which reached its apogee between ca. 600 and ca. 800 C.E.⁷¹ Since *avatāras* consist of this "pure matter," they are perfect. Christ, on the other hand, is subject to hunger, thirst, suffering, and so forth, since he has not only the divine nature but also the imperfect human nature. In fact, it is remarkable that, in Christianity, Christ brings redemption not merely through his incarnation but also through his *suffering* and *death*, and, of course, through his resurrection.⁷² Jesus' efficacious saving power is rooted in the incarnation, revealed in his teaching and deeds, and fulfilled in his death and resurrection. While Jesus' entire life is salvific,

the culmination is the Paschal Mystery, his death and resurrection. Having put Christ's salvific activity in perspective, the point that I wish to drive home here, however, is that, in contrast to the *avatāra* understanding—and indeed in contrast to many other religions—Christ is the *suffering* Savior. It is this “folly of the Cross” or “scandal of the Cross” that is uniquely Christian.

The mystery of the incarnation consists specifically in how the same person can be both divine and human, perfect and imperfect. We should note that early Hindu texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* seem to describe very realistically the *avatāra*'s human experience, for example Rāma's pain of separation from Sītā. However, later texts, and especially the Vaiṣṇavite theologians, state that hunger, thirst, suffering, and so forth, in the case of *avatāras*, are only appearances; they generate loving devotion (*bhakti*) in the devotees but are not real.⁷³ Hence, when Kṛṣṇa cries for milk, for instance, it is not because he is hungry, but it is to help his foster mother Yaśodā experience parental love (*vātsalya-bhakti*) toward him.⁷⁴ Similarly, the death of Kṛṣṇa, narrated, for example, in the *Mausalaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, is explained away by some later texts and commentators. For instance, Vādirāja, in his gloss on 16.8.31, which mentions the cremation of Kṛṣṇa's body, categorically declares that, before ascending into heaven, Kṛṣṇa created an artificial body in order to deceive the people, for his real body cannot be burnt.⁷⁵ In the story of Kṛṣṇa's death by being mistakenly shot by Jarā (“Old Age”), the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and more so the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* show how Kṛṣṇa is fully in control of the situation.⁷⁶ *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.31.6 explicitly states that Kṛṣṇa entered into his own abode, without burning his body. Several commentators, in their explanations of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 11.30 and 31, endeavor to show that Kṛṣṇa did not die.⁷⁷

In the case of Christ, however, it should be remarked that, although he has imperfections, he does not have the blemish of sin; he is like human beings in all things but sin (Heb 4.15). Moreover, unlike ordinary human beings, he is able to work miracles in reference to himself as well as others.⁷⁸ After his resurrection he is no more subject to human needs, even though he retains his human nature.⁷⁹ In Catholic theology, Mary the mother of Jesus is conceived without original sin,⁸⁰ although she is a creature, a human being; she is real, but does not have the defect of original sin. These examples would help Christians to appreciate the doctrine of the Vaiṣṇavites that the *avatāras* are real but do not have any flaws. Just as it is possible for Christ to be real and yet not have certain deficiencies, so also would it not be possible to conceive of God having a real incarnate form and yet at the same time be exempt not only from sin but also from all imperfections? We could therefore say that even within Christianity it is conceivable to have an incarnation that, as in Hinduism, has a real form but has no defects at all. However, the fact, according to Christianity, is that Christ has imperfections. This truth, in a sense, makes devotees feel close to Christ, who has shared the weakness of their human nature (Heb 4.15): “he pitched his tent among us” (Jn 1.14).

In this context of “real and perfect” versus “real and imperfect,” we must distinguish between “real” and “historical.” A historical being is subject to time. Hence, for theists, God, as such, is real but not historical. Non-Hindus may consider

some *avatāras* as mythical and look upon others such as Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, or especially Gautama Buddha⁸¹ as well as several others, as historical.⁸² However, whatever secular history may have to say of these “historical” beings, for the Vaiṣṇavite theologian they are all real but not historical; that is, they are not subject to imperfections such as time, hunger, thirst, and so forth. In this sense, for a Jew, Yahweh is real but not historical; and for a Christian, the First Person and the Third Person of the Trinity are real but not historical, while Christ is real as well as historical. It is important to bear this distinction in mind, for when Christians, for example, query whether Kṛṣṇa is historical, sometimes an assumption seems to lurk behind the question, namely that Christ is historical and therefore real, while Kṛṣṇa is not historical and therefore not real. In fact, to ask whether Kṛṣṇa is historical is a meaningless question for the Vaiṣṇavite: it is impossible for an *avatāra* to be historical.⁸³ According to the Vaiṣṇavites the *avatāras* really manifest themselves at definite times and places and really perform various deeds, but not all their actions can be taken at face value. For instance, we have seen above how Kṛṣṇa’s death is explained away.

I should point out that the Hindu understanding that the *avatāra* has no deficiencies is also associated with the idea of a human being, who is essentially only a spirit or soul. A human being is not soul and body; it is only through ignorance (*avidyā*) that the soul is associated with a body.⁸⁴ In Hinduism, the soul in itself is without beginning and end, and even though, according to the theistic schools, it is limited compared to God, it cannot suffer hunger, thirst, and so forth. It experiences these weaknesses only because of its false identification with the body. In Christianity, on the other hand, a human being is both soul and body: matter is an essential part of a human being. In this sense, matter is given more importance than in Hinduism. Hence, Christianity is not embarrassed to admit imperfections in Christ, who is human, even though divine. Similarly, in Hinduism, if the *avatāra* were limited, it would mean that it is because of its being bound by its past deeds (*karman*), based on ignorance (*avidyā*). Therefore, we can see that it is our presuppositions that determine our ideas to a certain extent.

Even a partial *avatāra* is perfect. In this context, it should be noted that while in Vaiṣṇavism there are partial⁸⁵ and full *avatāras*, Christ has never been thought of as a partial incarnation. In Vaiṣṇavism, we have not only partial *avatāras* but also descents of parts of God or even of the weapons of God. Somehow, in Christianity one cannot think of this. A. J. Appasamy thinks that the reason is that a Spirit cannot be split into sections—only physical things can be divided into different parts⁸⁶—while Julius Lipner, referring to the Christian theologian Hebblethwaite, opines that it may be because of the once-and-for-all, unique intervention of the incarnation, who is the only human manifestation of God.⁸⁷ Even when the Eucharistic host is broken, the whole Christ is present in every particle. The complete and full revelation cannot be fragmented.

In the case of an *Arcāvatāra*, that is, a descent of Viṣṇu into a consecrated image for the sake of worship (*arcā*), one may conclude that while Viṣṇu enters into the image with a divine body made up of the perfect “pure matter” (*śuddha-sattva*), the image itself remains imperfect matter (*prakṛti*). Incidentally, the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is not considered an incarnation.⁸⁸

Avatāras have different purposes, and, unlike the incarnation, not every avatāra grants ultimate salvation. Some *avatāras* come only to save a devotee from a particular difficulty; for example Narasimha (Man-Lion) saves his devotee Prahlāda from persecution, and, once this task is done, Viṣṇu abandons his Man-Lion form. The common theory is that the Buddha *avatāra* comes to mislead the wicked into Buddhism.⁸⁹ Similarly, the Mohinī descent deceives the demons.

In the case of Christ, on the other hand, especially since there is only one incarnation, the purpose is primarily, if not exclusively, ultimate salvation. In this context, Joseph Neuner forcefully and repeatedly emphasizes the radical difference between the salvific activity of the incarnation and the *avatāras*. Christ saves by assuming a finite human nature, which is limited and conditioned by time, history, and suffering. The *avatāras*, on the contrary, do not in any way subject themselves to finite nature, to its pains and limitations.⁹⁰ In Hindu terms, Christ takes on the imperfect *prakṛti*.⁹¹ Unlike the *avatāra*, Christ saves precisely through the Cross; the suffering Savior is part of the uniqueness of Christianity. This fundamental difference arises, of course, from the contrasting worldviews of the two traditions. For a Hindu it is impossible for God to become imperfect. Moreover, since the souls themselves are not really in contact with material bodies—their apparent contact with bodies being due to their ignorance—still less is there a need for the omniscient and perfect *avatāra* to take on a body that is made up of imperfect *prakṛti*; rather, the *avatāra* assumes a body consisting of the perfect “pure matter” (*śuddha-sattva*).

Neuner also points out that while the *avatāras* do liberate human beings from the world, unlike Christ they do not redeem and transform the material world itself. The universe keeps moving in its cyclic process, but is not elevated by being given a new orientation and fulfillment in God. History has no end and is not given an ultimate meaning or destiny. *Prakṛti* itself is not transfigured—there is no resurrection of the material body; only the souls are saved.⁹² It is true that in Hinduism the defective *prākṛtic* matter is not redeemed or resurrected, especially since it does not form part of the essence of human beings, who are essentially only spirits.⁹³ On the other hand, for several schools of Hinduism the imperfect *prakṛti*, too, is already a part or aspect of God. Rayan reminds us that according to Rāmānuja not only the souls but also the world is the body of God, and that in Christianity men and women do not marry after their resurrection. He also points out that we need to clarify the full content of the Christian belief that not only humanity but also the world has been transformed and redeemed by Christ.⁹⁴ In this context, we may note that the Boar (*varāha*)⁹⁵ *avatāra* saves the overburdened earth, which is no doubt personified; this story is interpreted as a new creation. In fact, the stories of the Fish and Tortoise *avatāras* are also interpreted as creation stories.⁹⁶ Of course, it is not expressly stated that this creation or re-creation is also a transformation or lifting up of the earlier creation to a higher plane. Be that as it may, it is obvious that the different approaches of Christianity and Hinduism to the redemption of the material world are linked with their different linear and cyclic worldviews.

Besides having salvific functions, the *Vyūhāvatāras* (Grouped Descents) also play cosmic and superintending roles. Similarly, the *Antaryāmin* (Inner Controller)

avatāra acts as an inspirer within people, and the *Arcāvatāra* is meant for worship. In recent times liberation theologians have also pointed out that Christ comes not only to grant ultimate salvation but also to help bring about justice and true freedom in our world. In this context, the Hindu *avatāras* appear to be more liberative, reestablishing righteousness (*dharma*), often through violence, as we can see, for instance, in the many exploits not only of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma but also of some other *avatāras*. It is interesting to note that while the *avatāras* are often violent, Hinduism presents aspects of the ideal of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) for human beings, and, until recent times, Hinduism has had a generally peaceful and tolerant tradition. Conversely, while Christianity has traditionally been very intolerant, violent, and exclusive in its approach to other religions, its founder is depicted in the New Testament as largely nonviolent.⁹⁷

Some have emphasized that Christ comes to save sinners, while many *avatāras* destroy the wicked.⁹⁸ This, however, does not mean that *avatāras* do not save those who have gone astray; even a very evil person can find eternal peace through devotion.⁹⁹ In Christianity, too, an unrepentant sinner is condemned. Note, however, that in later texts Kṛṣṇa and Rāma bestow salvation also by slaying those who hate them.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, many Hindus believe that the immoral may eventually be saved, even if it is after several births, although some, like Madhva, hold that certain souls will never be saved, since they are wicked by their very nature.¹⁰¹ Moreover, it should be noted that Christians believe that Christ, at his Second Coming, will destroy his enemies. Again, some activities of *avatāras* may appear unethical,¹⁰² and some of the actions of Rāma, and especially of Kṛṣṇa, have often been criticized.¹⁰³ However, as I have shown in several articles, later texts, and especially the commentators, take pains to justify them.¹⁰⁴ In this context, I may refer once again to the different worldviews with regard to the problem of evil. In the *bhakti* tradition, God is in some way responsible for evil, too. Evil is something positive, and if God is not somehow responsible for it, then this means that there is something independent of God over which God has no control. Even though God has the *anugraha-śakti* (the power of grace), through which he bestows grace on his devotees, he also has the *āvaraṇa-śakti* (veiling power), by means of which he deludes people.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, Christianity traditionally held that evil is not a positive thing; it is the privation of good, and God is not responsible for it.

These are the main differences between *avatāra* and incarnation, which I have discussed in a nuanced way. One may also find more differences; for example, an *avatāra* manifests the Absolute,¹⁰⁶ generally Viṣṇu, who is, of course, a personal Creator-God, while the incarnation (Christ) reveals the Trinity.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Our comparative study has shown, first, that the concepts of *avatāra* and incarnation are not so incompatible as may appear at first sight. Some similarities have already been pointed out. But even the differences are not always so sharp; rather they are nuanced. Although there are many *avatāras*, each of which descends repeatedly,

while the incarnation occurs only once, there nonetheless exists the possibility of many incarnations not only on our earth but also on another planet or in another universe, not to mention the actuality of the Resurrected Christ manifesting himself to different people, as well as the future Second Coming of Christ. Compared to later Vaiṣṇavism, the understanding of the *Gītā* is closer to that of Christianity in that Kṛṣṇa has an imperfect body made of *prakṛti*. However, in the *Gītā* the union of *prakṛti* with the divinity of Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu is not like the hypostatic union in Christianity, nor does Kṛṣṇa have a human soul.

Christ takes on a weak human nature together with many of its imperfections; this brings devotees closer to him, since he shares in their life. On the other hand, the repeated manifestations of the *avatāras* also display the loving providence of God. Then again, there is still a certain amount of uniqueness in the *avatāras* in the understanding that they become manifest in separate ages or *yugas*. These are some of the elements, which, although different in some ways, lessen the gulf between the two concepts of *avatāra* and incarnation.

Second, the differences in the two doctrines are due to their contrasting worldviews. It makes sense to have many and repeated *avatāras* in a cyclic worldview, and similarly one sees the point in the incarnation taking place once and for all in a linear worldview. This understanding helps each tradition to appreciate the other and view it in the proper perspective. We have also seen that although both the incarnation and the *avatāras* are real, the incarnation is imperfect, while the *avatāras* are perfect. This, too, is tied up with the respective worldviews: in Hinduism spirit and matter are united only due to *karman* and ignorance, while in Christianity the human soul is substantially related to matter, and therefore there would be less difficulty in admitting defects in Christ, since matter is not so alienated from spirit. However, here again the difference is not so great as may initially appear, for Christ is without sin, and, after the resurrection, he is no more subject to human needs. On the Hindu side, in some schools, matter is a part or aspect of God. This gives matter some importance since it is not so alien to God. We may also recall in this context the significant distinction between “real” and “historical”: whatever is historical may be real, but whatever is real need not be historical. The implications of this distinction are important.

Furthermore, we have noticed that at times the practice is not always in consonance with the theory. For example, Christianity paradoxically does not take the humanity of the helpless Child Jesus sufficiently seriously, even though this would be in accord with its understanding of the incarnation. On the other hand, Hinduism practices parental love (*vātsalya*) toward the fully divine and perfect Child Rāma or Child Kṛṣṇa. While several *avatāras* are frequently violent, the Hindu religion generally extols the virtue of nonviolence. On the other hand, the followers of the largely nonviolent Jesus have unleashed a tremendous amount of violence in the world.

Theistic religions believe that God is present in the universe in diverse ways. First, God is present everywhere. This omnipresence is a general, spiritual presence. However, God becomes present also in other ways. People experience a special divine presence in holy places and in the commemoration of sacred events. The

presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the indwelling of the *Arcāvatāra* in the consecrated image are again another form of God becoming present. God is also present in our hearts, especially as the Holy Spirit in Christianity and as the *Antaryāmin* in Hinduism. Now when we consider the presence of God in the *avatāras* and in the incarnation, we discover that the mode of manifestation is different. In Christianity the emphasis is on “historical presence,” while the manifestation in Hinduism is “ahistorical.” In both cases, there is a real manifestation, a real presence, but the manner of becoming manifest differs. Each kind of presence also has different implications. Each of these views stresses one aspect or form of God’s presence. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, and thus the two points of view can complement each other.

The presence of similarities in the two traditions helps to confirm and strengthen each tradition. It is heartening for both to realize that the other religio-cultural tradition also speaks of God’s special presence in the world, thus emphasizing, for instance, involvement in the world rather than running away from it. Second, besides enabling the better understanding of the other tradition, the comparison also contributes to each tradition having a better self-understanding. Christians or Hindus may take their respective linear or cyclic worldviews for granted, perhaps even without being consciously aware of them. It is only when they encounter a contrasting approach to reality that they begin to investigate their own presuppositions, and, in doing so, they understand more deeply the significance and meaning of their own worldview. They begin to see also how the different elements in their tradition fit into their worldview and make sense within that worldview. It is through this mutual encounter that Christians and Hindus realize more profoundly the reasons why there are many and repeated *avatāras*, and why there is only one incarnation in Christianity.

Third, the two points of view can complement and challenge each other. This can happen in two ways. First, the fact that the other tradition is also doing something that is proper in one’s own tradition can spur one to realize the implications of one’s own doctrine and translate it into meaningful practice. Thus, for instance, the realization that Hindus take the Child Kṛṣṇa or Rāma more seriously can be an impetus to Christians to pay more attention to the implications of Christ taking on a weak, imperfect human nature. In this case, Christmas would be an ideal time for Christians to practice parental love (*vātsalya*) toward the Child Jesus, and thus enrich their relationship to God through a form of devotion that is practically nonexistent in Christianity. Similarly, the cosmic sense and nearness to nature in Hinduism could inspire Christians to explore more deeply the redemption of the material world since it is of a piece with the Christian understanding of Christ assuming a human nature, which includes matter. Although the ideal of working for the welfare of the world is present in Hinduism, the actual implementation of this ideal in service to society is not so widespread as it is in Christianity. This realization can be an added impetus for Hinduism to rediscover the value of social welfare and thus carry out the teaching of Kṛṣṇa and establish the kingdom of Rāma (*Rāma-rājya*).

The second type of complementarity takes place through the contrasting worldviews. Contemporary Christologies rightly highlight the implications of God becom-

ing a human being, for example Christ's growth in knowledge and his progressive understanding of his mission. In so doing, they surely draw inspiration from the original experience of Christ's disciples as articulated in the New Testament. However, in my opinion, the pendulum seems to be swinging a bit too much in this direction in the case of some modern interpretations of the Christ event. In such a scenario, the Hindu *avatāra* doctrine can be a healthy corrective to the overemphasis on the historical in some contemporary Christologies. On the other hand, the Christian conviction can contribute to Hinduism a deeper sense of history and commitment to the world. Christ's assumption of a weak human nature is certainly an inspiration to work for progress and human development. Hindus themselves can find support in the doctrine found in some schools that matter is the body of God or a part or aspect of God, and thus take matter, and therefore human development and progress, more seriously. At the same time, the strong emphasis on the reestablishment of righteousness in the *avatāra* stories can give greater encouragement to Christian liberation theologians in their quest to discover liberative elements in Christ's incarnation (and so, too, in his Second Coming, which has been largely neglected) so as to help the poor and the oppressed fight for their rights. On the other hand, the distinctive emphasis on the suffering Savior in Christianity can be an inspiration for Hinduism to discover the redemptive and healing values of self-suffering, which should be distinguished from the practice of asceticism (*tapas*). The latter is for the good of the person who undertakes penance, whereas the concept of self-suffering is to bring about conversion and healing in another. Mahatma Gandhi integrated this Christian understanding of suffering into his theory and practice of nonviolence (*ahimsā*).¹⁰⁸

In this encounter of the two traditions there is also the further possibility that when one tradition tries to assimilate elements from the other tradition, these original elements may themselves undergo transformation and acquire new meaning and significance. Perhaps this is the path that future interreligious dialogue between the two traditions may take. At any rate, the ongoing mutual encounter of the two concepts of *avatāra* and incarnation will help adherents of the two traditions to bridge better the gulf between God and humanity, heaven and earth, and the sacred and the secular.

Notes

- 1 – This article itself has had several incarnations. It was first presented at the Thirty-fourth Session of the All-India Oriental Conference, Visakhapatnam, 1989, and then, in a revised and developed form, at the Ninth World Sanskrit Conference, Melbourne, 1994. It was subsequently delivered at different times and in different forms, including public lectures in universities in the United States in 1995.
- 2 – Belief in divine descent is found in several other religious traditions as well. For example, in the *Trikāya* doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *Dharma-*

- kāya* manifests itself as the *Sambhoga-kāya*, and the latter manifests itself as the *Nirmāṇa-kāya*. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama is an indirect *avatāra* of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, while the Panchen Lama is an indirect *avatāra* of the Buddha Amitābha. The Shingon school of Japan believes in the cosmic incarnation of the Buddha Mahāvairocana. The ancient Iranians believed in the incarnation of Mithra. In ancient Egypt, China, and Japan, kings were considered gods incarnate. Even in primal religions there is some evidence for the belief in divine incarnation; see Manabu Waida, "Incarnation," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company; London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), vol. 7, pp. 156–161.
- 3 – Paul Hacker traces the terminological history of the doctrine of *avatāra* in his article "Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre" (*Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 4 [1960]: 47–70), reprinted in Paul Hacker, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Lambert Schmithausen, Glasenapp-Stiftung vol. 15 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1978). He informs us that the earlier words for Viṣṇu's manifestations were *rūpa*, *vapus*, *tanu*, and *ākṛti* (form); these were followed by the expression *prādurbhāva* (manifestation) (pp. 405–407). The term *avataraṇa* first referred to the action of descending, not to the person who descended (p. 417). Similarly, even when the word *avatāra* first replaces *avataraṇa*, it refers to the action alone and not to the person (pp. 421–422). *Avataraṇa* is employed not only for the descent of deities but also in a very peculiar sense, namely the removal of the burden of the earth or, more literally, "making the burden [of the earth] descend" (*bhārāvatarāṇa*) (p. 415). Initially, the word *avatāra* was applied to other deities as well, and was not used in reference to every manifestation of Viṣṇu. It is only around the sixth century C.E. that the term was reserved primarily for all the descents of Viṣṇu (pp. 409, 424).
 - 4 – Some others, for example Kabir, the Ādi Brāhmo Samāj, Prārthanā Samāj, and Ārya Samāj, deny the existence of *avatāras*; see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 93–94, 100.
 - 5 – He descends into the womb of Aditi, and later emerges from her in the form of an egg, which develops into her son Mārtaṇḍa (*Brahma Purāṇa* 30).
 - 6 – *Harivaṃśa* 1.53–54 mentions a number of deities, sages, demons, and so forth who descend to earth during the time of the Kṛṣṇa *avatāra*.
 - 7 – The word *avatāra*, however, does not occur in the *Gītā* and is of later origin.
 - 8 – Jan Gonda, *Les religions de l'Inde*, vol. 1, *Védisme et Hindouisme ancien*, trans. from the German by L. Jospin, Collection des religions de l'humanité (Paris: Payot, 1962), p. 291.
 - 9 – He emanates himself through his own *māyā*, which is his creative power and does not have the meaning of illusion that Advaita gives it.
 - 10 – Verse 7.5 also refers to Kṛṣṇa's higher (*parā*) nature, which is the life that sustains the world. However, here this higher nature probably does not refer to

his highest, divine essence (cf. 7.24) but to all the individual selves or souls; see R. C. Zaehner's comments on this verse in his *The Bhagavad-Gītā, with a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (London: Oxford University Press 1969; paperback 1973), pp. 245–246.

- 11 – For example, in 11.24, 30, and in 18.77 (in the latter verse he is called Hari, another name for Viṣṇu).
- 12 – Besides the founder of Buddhism, the Jain Ṛṣabha is also considered an *avatāra* in some Hindu texts.
- 13 – Sometimes Buddha is substituted by Balarāma in this list. The texts do not all enumerate these ten *avatāras* in the same order. Aurobindo, however, sees in this arrangement a “parable of evolution”—from the Fish to the half-animal, half-human Man-Lion, from the human Dwarf form to the more developed human forms, and then progressing to the more spiritually advanced forms of Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalkin; see Aurobindo, *On Yoga II: Letters on Yoga*, Tome 1, rev. and enl. ed., Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education Collection vol. 6 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1958; rev. and enl. ed. 1969), pp. 387–388.
- 14 – Note that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the main scriptural text of the Vaiṣṇavites, has a number of passages where Kṛṣṇa seems to be referred to as a partial (*aṁśa*) *avatāra*; see Noel Sheth, S.J., “Kṛṣṇa as a Portion of the Supreme,” *Purāṇa* 24(1) (January 1982): 79–90.
- 15 – S. L. Katre, “*Avatāras of God*,” *The Allahabad University Studies* (Arts and Science) 10 (1934): 48–51.
- 16 – Viṣṇu's personified power (*śakti*), Lakṣmī, also descends as *avatāras*, for example as Sītā and Rādhā.
- 17 – F. Otto Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra and the Ahirbudhnya Saṁhitā* (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Centre, 1973), pp. 40–57.
- 18 – Umesha Mishra, *Nimbārka School of Vedānta*, 2d ed. (Allahabad: Tirabhukti Publications, 1966), pp. 39–41.
- 19 – Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, 2d ed. (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), pp. 242–243.
- 20 – Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, p. 56.
- 21 – Francis X. D'Sa, “Christian Incarnation and Hindu Avatara,” *Concilium*, 1993, no. 2 (April): 82–84.
- 22 – For a brief study of some of these modern *avatāras*, see Daniel E. Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity: The Myth of the God-Man*, with a Foreword by Robert S. Ellwood (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1987), chap. 2.
- 23 – *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 85, and 92–93. In this context, Panikkar asserts, “The astound-

- ing affirmations of a Meher Baba: 'I am the Christ', 'I am infinite consciousness' ... constitute a serious problem which an unbiased theologian cannot dismiss as simple hallucinations or aberrations" (Raymond Panikkar, *Salvation in Christ: The Problem and the Promise* [Santa Barbara, California: 1972], p. 51, cited in Bassuk, *Incarnation in Hinduism and Christianity*, p. 86).
- 24 – Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India*, Editions in the Study of Religion vol. 5 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1984), p. 74.
- 25 – M. A. Mehendale, "Sanskrit Language and Literature," in R. C. Majumdar, gen. ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, 2d ed., 11 vols. (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1951–1977), vol. 2, *The Age of Imperial Unity* (1953), p. 253.
- 26 – A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India: A Study of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub-continent before the Coming of the Muslims*, new and rev. ed. (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1954; new and rev. ed., New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), pp. 307–308.
- 27 – Bruno Forte, *The Trinity as History: Saga of the Christian God* (New York: Alba House, 1989), pp. 7–9.
- 28 – Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 29–32.
- 29 – These are Christian writers of the second and third centuries C.E. who wrote works in defense (Latin *apologia*) of the Christian faith.
- 30 – In the Christological context, this Council was preceded by the First Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.), the First Council of Constantinople (381 C.E.), and the Council of Ephesus (431 C.E.).
- 31 – Derived from Greek *hypo*, "under," and *stasis*, "standing," that is, "sub-stance."
- 32 – See, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1976), "Incarnation," by R. A. Weis, and "Jesus Christ, II (In Dogmatic Theology)," by J. J. Walsh.
- 33 – See, in *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, English ed. (1995), "Christological Heresies" and "Christological Models," by Gerhard Ludwig Müller; "Christology: Contemporary Issues," by Anthony J. Godzieba; and "Hypostatic Union," by Lothar Ullrich.
- 34 – Joseph Neuner, S.J., "Das Christus-Mysterium und die indische Lehre von den Avatāras," in Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., and Heinrich Bacht, S.J., *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 vols. (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1951–1954), vol. 3, *Chalkedon heute*, pp. 815–816. Note, incidentally, that Neuner is not right in saying that Kṛṣṇa is not born virginally; on this see Noel

Sheth, S.J., *The Divinity of Krishna*, with a Foreword by Daniel H. H. Ingalls (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984), pp. 43–44.

- 35 – Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, pp. 37, 124–126.
- 36 – Ironically, Rāma, in the opinion of some scholars, was originally a Dravidian deity adopted and adapted by the Aryans. In this context, we could recall what I have said earlier concerning the evolution in the understanding of people with regard to the *avatāras*, just as the divinity and significance of Jesus was understood by his disciples only after his resurrection.
- 37 – Quoted in Pablo Richard, “1492: The Violence of God and the Future of Christianity,” *Concilium*, 1990, no. 6 (December): 66.
- 38 – Lipner brings out the difference between the Hindu and Christian worldviews in a more nuanced way. The Hindu understanding is not simply cyclical, for within each *yuga* there is scope for progress and history. Nor is the Christian view merely unilinear, for the incarnation, which gives new meaning to history, takes place in the midst of history and not at its beginning or end; see Julius Lipner, “*Avatāra* and Incarnation?” in *Re-visioning India’s Religious Traditions: Essays in Honour of Eric Lott*, ed. David C. Scott and Israel Selva-nayagam (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge [ISPCK], for the United Theological College, Bangalore, 1996), p. 137.
- 39 – Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 228.
- 40 – It will be noticed that this purpose of the Second Coming, in contrast to that of the First Coming, is more similar to the general goal of *avatāras* in the Hindu tradition, namely the destruction of the wicked and the restoration of justice.
- 41 – J. Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 411.
- 42 – For the Catholic tradition, see, for example, *The Documents of Vatican II, Ad Gentes*, 9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 39; *Lumen Gentium*, 49; *Dei Verbum*, 4. For an English translation, see Walter M. Abbott, S.J., gen. ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966). This belief was reiterated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its letter dated 17 May 1979, “*Epistula ad Venerabilis Praesules Conferentiarum Episcopatum de quibusdam quaestionibus ad Eschatologiam spectantibus*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71(11) (31 August 1979): 941. For the latter, see an English translation, “*Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology*,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, English ed., 12(30) (23 July 1979): 7.
- 43 – L. Berkhof, *The Second Coming of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 32–43.
- 44 – Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 222.
- 45 – His glorified body is identical with his incarnate body; see Berkhof, *The Second Coming of Christ*, p. 73.

- 46 – De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith*, p. 250. In the *Pāñcarātra*, too, the *avatāras* are eternal; see Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, p. 57. In the Nimbārka school also the descents are permanent; see Jadunath Sinha, *The Philosophy of Nimbārka* (Calcutta: Sinha Publishing House, 1973), p. 10. Similarly also, according to Madhva, all the bodies (including, therefore, the *avatāra* forms) of Viṣṇu are eternal; see Madhva's *Bhāgavata-tātparyanirṇayaḥ*, 1.3.1, *Sarva-mūla-granthāḥ*, 5 vols., ed. Bannanje Govindacharya (Udupi: Akhila Bharata Madhwa Maha Mandala, 1969–1980), vol. 3, *Purāṇa-prasthānam* (1980), p. 15.
- 47 – Samuel Rayan, S.J., "Interpreting Christ to India: The Contribution of Roman Catholic Seminaries," *Indian Journal of Theology* 23(3–4) (July–December 1974): 225.
- 48 – V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatār*, 2d ed. (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 1930), p. 137.
- 49 – De, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith*, pp. 334–335.
- 50 – Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby, O.P., and others, 60 vols. (London: Blackfriars and Eyre & Spottiswoode; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–1976), vol. 48, ed. and trans. R. J. Hennessey, O.P. (1976), 3a.3.8, esp. p. 113.
- 51 – *Ibid.*, 3a.3.5, esp. p. 99.
- 52 – *Ibid.*, 3a.3.6, esp. p. 103.
- 53 – *Ibid.*, 3a.3.7, esp. p. 107.
- 54 – *Ibid.*, 3a.4.5, esp. p. 129.
- 55 – Quentin Quesnell, "Aquinas on Avatars," *Dialogue and Alliance* 1(2) (Summer 1987): 39–41.
- 56 – Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a.4.1, vol. 48, pp. 117, 119.
- 57 – *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 58 – Quesnell, "Aquinas on Avatars," p. 37.
- 59 – Roch A. Kereszty, O.Cist., *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, ed. J. Stephen Maddux (New York: Alba House, 1991), pp. 379–380.
- 60 – Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, pp. 165 and 224.
- 61 – Lipner, "Avatāra and Incarnation?" p. 135. He also points out that the separation of human beings from the rest of creation in Christianity has been strengthened by the uniqueness of Christ. This anthropocentric worldview has resulted in a negative attitude toward ecology (*ibid.*). This is true; however, Christianity can develop a healthier attitude toward nature if it pays attention to God's transformation not only of human beings, but also of the whole of creation (Col 1.20; Rom 8.19–23). Interestingly, the fact that material nature

(*prakṛti*) is much more separated from the soul (*puruṣa*) in Hinduism than in Christianity has not led to a distancing from nature in Hinduism. For a discussion of the uniqueness of Christ, in the context of a dialogue with the Hindu understanding of the *avatāras*, see Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995), chap. 4, “The Faces of God: Discovering the Incarnation in India.”

- 62 – Śaṅkara, for instance, asserts in his commentary on *Gītā* 4.6 that Kṛṣṇa is not really (*paramārthataḥ*) born and embodied, he only appears (*iva*, “as it were”) to be so; see *The Bhagavad-gītā, with the Commentary of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, critically ed. by Dinkar Vishnu Gokhale, 2d rev. ed., Poona Oriental Series no. 1 (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1950), p. 65. See also Śaṅkara’s remarks on 4.7 and 9.
- 63 – Zacharias, O.C.D., *Christianity and Indian Mentality* (Alwaye: St. Joseph’s Apostolic Seminary, 1952), pp. 57 and 65; Stephen Fuchs, “Hindu *Avatāras* and Christian Incarnation [Concluded],” *The Examiner* [Bombay] 122(35), (28 August 1971): 559.
- 64 – For example, A. J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s Heritage* (London and Madras: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1942), p. 262.
- 65 – Neuner, “Das Christus-Mysterium,” p. 794.
- 66 – On *Gītā* 4.5–6, see *The Bhagavad Gītā, with Ramanuja’s Bhashya and Vedanta Desika’s Commentary Named Tatparya Chandrika*, ed., with notes, by T. Viraraghavacharya (Madras: Ubhaya Vedanta Granthamala, 1972), p. 146. The fact that Madhva says that Viṣṇu only appears to be born (*Bhagavad-gītā-bhaṣyam* and *Bhagavad-gītā-tātparyam*, on 4.6, *Sarva-mūla-granthāḥ*, vol. 1, *Prasthānatrayī* [1969], p. 50), should not make us conclude that the *avatāra* forms are unreal, for Madhva, like Rāmānuja, only means to exclude prakṛtic imperfections in Viṣṇu’s forms. Besides, since for Madhva all of Viṣṇu’s forms are eternal like Viṣṇu himself, who is real, one should infer that his *avatāra* forms, too, are real. Similarly, Jīva Gosvāmin of the Caitanya school asserts that the *avatāras* and their deeds are not illusions imagined through ignorance (*avidyā*), as is the case with the conch being mistaken for silver; see *Bhagavat-sandarbhāḥ*, ed. Chinmayi Chatterjee (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1972), p. 67.
- 67 – Richard De Smet, “Jesus and the *Avatāra*,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. J. D. Gort and others (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. D. Eerdmans; Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989), pp. 158–159, 161–162.
- 68 – *Gītā* 7.4–5, 15.7.
- 69 – These six *guṇas* are: *jñāna* (omniscience), *aśvarya* (activity based on independent lordship), *śakti* (ability to become the material cause of the world),

bala (force, i.e., absence of fatigue in producing the world), *vīrya* (virility, i.e., changelessness in spite of being the cause of the world), and *tejas* (self-sufficient splendor, i.e., without dependence on any other in producing the world); see Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, pp. 36–39, 55.

- 70 – Even though Rāmānuja holds that the *avatāra*’s birth is real, he makes it clear that his birth is not ordinary like that of other persons. It is not rooted in *karman*, not due to contact with *prakṛti*. Rather his birth is divine, extraordinary—he does not abandon his divine qualities and lordly nature; see Rāmānuja’s commentary on *Bhagavad-gītā* 4.5–6, 9, in Viraraghavacharya, ed., *Bhagavad Gītā, with Ramanuja’s Bhashya and Vedanta Desika’s Commentary*, pp. 146–149, 151. This is also the view of Pāñcarātra; see Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, pp. 55 and 59. The Nimbārka school believes in the same doctrine; see Sinha, *The Philosophy of Nimbārka*, p. 10. Madhva, too, quotes passages to prove that all the bodies (including, therefore, the *avatāra* forms) are not from ordinary *prakṛti*; see Madhva’s *Bhagavata-tātparya-nirṇayaḥ* 1.3.1, *Sarva-mūla-granthāḥ*, vol. 3, p. 15. Similarly, Jīva Gosvāmin of the Bengal school says that the births and actions of the Lord are different from ordinary (*prākṛta*) birth and actions; see *Bhagavat-sandarbhāḥ*, pp. 66–67.
- 71 – Jan Gonda, *Les religions de l’Inde*, vol. 2, *L’Hindouisme récent*, trans. from the German by L. Jospin, Collection les religions de l’humanité (Paris: Payot, 1965), p. 146.
- 72 – In the fullest sense, of course, salvation in Christianity is Trinitarian: the Father reconciles and restores humanity in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit. However, the redemptive function is specifically attributed to Christ.
- 73 – In the context of the controversy concerning the birthplace of Rāma (*Rāma-janma-bhūmi*) and the mosque of Babar (*bābarī masjid*) in Ayodhya, it should be remarked that the birth of Rāma is not an empirical, imperfect (historical) birth.
- 74 – It is noteworthy that in Christianity devotees relate to the baby Jesus as their Lord, rather than as their child—as witnessed, for example, in the great majority of Christmas carols. This is indeed a paradox, for Christ has an imperfect body. Furthermore, in Christianity the soul and body form one unit, and hence one would expect that the body (the helpless baby Jesus) be taken more seriously than in Hinduism. On the other hand, the Hindu devotees sing lullabies to the baby Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, treating them as their children when celebrating their birthdays. This is the prevalent practice in spite of the fact that Kṛṣṇa and Rāma do not have any human imperfections, even as babies; see Noel Sheth, “The Child Krishna,” *Jeevadhara* 19 (May 1989): 235–236 (note that there are a number of printing mistakes in this article; see the Apology by the editor in *Jeevadhara* 19 [July 1989]: 306), and see also Noel Sheth, “Hindu Forms of Devotion (*Bhakti*),” *Third Millennium: Indian Journal of Evangelization* 2(2) (April–June 1999): 81.

- 75 – Quoted by Belvalkar in his Critical Notes on 16.5.21; see *The Mahābhārata*, critically ed. by Vishnu S. Sukthankar and others, 19 vols. (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1959), vol. 19, pt. 2, *Mausalaparvan*, critically ed. by Shripad Krishna Belvalkar (1959), p. 48.
- 76 – Sheth, *The Divinity of Krishna*, pp. 72–73.
- 77 – See some examples in Noel Sheth, S.J., “The Justification of Kṛṣṇa’s Annihilation of His Own Clan,” in *Makaranda: Madhukar Anant Mehendale Festschrift*, ed. M. A. Dhaky and J. B. Shah (Ahmedabad: Sharadaben Chimanbhai Educational Research Centre, 2000), p. 66.
- 78 – Not every “miracle” of Jesus, however, is interpreted as a miracle by scholars of Scripture.
- 79 – In fact, Christians believe that even mere human beings will be free from hunger, thirst, and so forth after their resurrection.
- 80 – The flawed state of our basically good human nature into which we human beings are born from the dawn of the human race. Hence human beings are in need of redemption antecedent to any personal sin on their part.
- 81 – In Theravāda, Gautama Buddha is real, while for Mahāyāna he is only an unreal manifestation of the absolute Ādi Buddha, which is the only Reality.
- 82 – Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation*, p. 122.
- 83 – Of course, a secondary or Āveśa (Entrance or Possessed) *avatāra*, that is, an ignorant soul who is bound to ordinary, imperfect *prakṛti* but into whom Viṣṇu has entered for a special purpose, is historical.
- 84 – In certain schools, souls in the state of salvation can take on bodies, but they are not bound to these bodies.
- 85 – According to Madhva, however, all the *avatāras* are full (*pūrṇa*), having the qualities of Viṣṇu fully in them; see Madhva’s *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣyam*, 2.3.17.47, and his *Brahma-sūtrānuvyākhyānam*, 2.3.81, *Sarva-mūla-granthāḥ*, vol. 1, p. 106. For further references from Madhva and his commentators on this point, and an explanation, in Scholastic terminology, of the *avatāras* being equal to, and the same as, Viṣṇu, see I. Puthiadam, *Viṣṇu the Ever Free: A Study of the Mādhva Concept of God*, Dialogue Series, no. 5 (Madurai: Dialogue Series, 1985), pp. 143–147.
- 86 – Appasamy, *The Gospel and India’s Heritage*, p. 257.
- 87 – Lipner, “*Avatāra* and Incarnation?” pp. 138–139. (His reference to Hebblethwaite is on pp. 135–136.)
- 88 – On the *Arcāvatāra* and its comparison with the Eucharistic presence of Jesus, see Noel Sheth, S.J., “Hindu Parallels to the Eucharist,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 62(9 and 10) (September and October 1998): 691–692, 762–763; for a concise version of this article, see idem, “Hindu Sacrifice

- and the Christian Eucharist," in *Body, Bread, Blood: Eucharistic Perspectives for the Indian Church*, ed. Francis Gonsalves, S.J., Contextual Theology Education Series, vol. 21 (Delhi: ISPCK and Vidyajyoti Education and Welfare Society, 2000), pp. 69, 79.
- 89 – Contrary to the prevalent view, the *Gītāgovinda* (1.13, 16) mentions that the Buddha *avatāra* came to spread compassion by condemning animal sacrifice; see Barbara Stoler Miller, ed. and trans., *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītāgovinda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 71, 131.
- 90 – Neuner, "Das Christus-Mysterium," pp. 794, 799–805, 809, 812–813, 820.
- 91 – Note that the analogy here is not perfect. For example, there is no soul in *prakṛti*, but, according to mainstream Christianity, Christ's human nature also has a soul.
- 92 – Neuner, "Das Christus-Mysterium," pp. 793, 805, 821.
- 93 – However, the saved souls in Vaiṣṇavism are endowed with "pure matter" (*śuddha-sattva*), through which they enjoy the beatific vision of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa in Vaikuṅṭha or Goloka; see Schrader, *Introduction to the Pāñcarātra*, pp. 59–60.
- 94 – Rayan, "Interpreting Christ to India," pp. 225–226.
- 95 – Jews and Muslims would be horrified to learn that God assumes the form of a pig, an unclean animal for them. Once again, we see how our background and culture play an important role in our understanding.
- 96 – Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 181, 184, 273, 275.
- 97 – See the various essays in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, Studies in Peace and Scripture, vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).
- 98 – Appasamy, *The Gospel and India's Heritage*, pp. 257–258; Zacharias, *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, pp. 61–62.
- 99 – *Gītā* 9.30–31.
- 100 – See Noel Sheth, S.J., "Salvation through Hate," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 46(4) (April 1982): 193–198, and idem, *The Divinity of Krishna*, pp. 147–154. A much more elaborate treatment, with added material, is found in idem, "Salvation through Hatred," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 80(1–4) (2000): 167–181.
- 101 – B.N.K. Sharma, *Philosophy of Śrī Madhvācārya* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), p. 204.
- 102 – In this context, we may refer to the apparent disobedience of Jesus to his parents; see Lk 2.41–50.

- 103 – For example, Zacharias, *Christianity and Indian Mentality*, pp. 70–71; Neuner, “Das Christus-Mysterium,” p. 823 (however, elsewhere [p. 801, n. 34] he gives an explanation from the standpoint of the religious and social background); Stephen Fuchs, “Hindu *Avatāras* and Christian Incarnation (Part I),” *The Examiner* (21 August 1971): 543. Interestingly, Fuchs remarks that, unlike Christ, the *avatāra* can identify with his human nature so fully as even to become a sinner; see “Hindu *Avatāras* and Christian Incarnation (Concluded),” *The Examiner* [Bombay] (28 August 1971): 559.
- 104 – References to several of my publications on justifications of Kṛṣṇa with regard to his childhood pranks, his relationship with the herdswomen and the hunchbacked woman, his acts of stealing, and his disfigurement of Rukmin, are found in Sheth, “The Justification of Krishna’s Destruction of the Yādavas,” *Purāṇa* 40 (1) (January 1998), n. 1.
- 105 – For a further elaboration of this double role of God, see Neuner, “Das Christus-Mysterium,” pp. 797–798.
- 106 – *Ibid.*, pp. 788–790.
- 107 – In this context, we should note that Dattātreyā is considered by some to be an *avatāra* of the Hindu Trimūrti of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. It should be remarked that although there are many similarities between the two concepts of Trinity and Trimūrti, there is a fundamental difference between them. The Trinity is three Persons in one God. In the Trimūrti, however, God is one Person who is manifested in three (*tri*) lower forms (*mūrti*), which are real for the theistic Hindus, but unreal for Advaita.
- 108 – See Noel Sheth, S.J., “The Non-Violence of Mahatma Gandhi,” *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies* 4(1) (January 2001): 63–64.